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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: GEMAYEL ASSASSINATION, IRAQI SECTARIAN CONFLICT, PRESS FREEDOM IN OMAN

REF: MUSCAT 1627

¶1. SUMMARY: State daily "Oman" blames Israel's Lebanon policy for precipitating the Gemayel assassination; private paper "Al-Watan" says "foreign powers" are hindering solutions to Iraq's bloodshed; an "Al-Watan" columnist wants more "constructive criticism" in local media; Omani government shuts down popular Internet discussion forum "Al-Sablah." END SUMMARY.

COVERAGE

¶2. Some Omani dailies have begun flatly describing the situation in Iraq as "civil war," as in a November 25 front page headline in government-owned, Arabic language "Oman". The term previously appeared only in commentaries and editorial columns.

ISRAEL'S LEBANON POLICY AND GEMAYEL ASSASSINATION

¶3. On November 25 "Oman" (circulation 38,000) highlighted the recent assassination of the Lebanese minister of industry under the headline "Lebanon Heading into the Unknown":

"For more than half a century Israel has employed a divide-and-rule strategy to create civil conflict in Lebanon and other Arab states, one that has prevented Arabs from cooperating to solve their problems. The latest political collapse and the assassination of the Lebanese minister of industry does nothing to further the process of national reconciliation or Lebanon's efforts to solve its political dilemmas. Since the Israeli attack and the victory of the Lebanese resistance, the political situation in Lebanon has been going through a critical and complicated phase, because the various Lebanese political powers never reached a compromise. Everyone needs to think wisely to keep Lebanon from repeating its history."

IRAQI SECTARIAN CONFLICT

¶4. On November 25, "Al-Watan" commented on Iraqi sectarian conflict in "God Protect Iraq":

"The continuing violence and bloodshed in Iraq brings sorrow and pain not only to Iraqis but to all Arabs, Muslims, and the

international community. We have warned about the dangers of following the whims of sectarian, regional, and civil fights. Yet it seems there are greater powers involved who have a tremendous ability to impact events in Iraq. These powers prohibit the application of reason and logic towards finding solutions in Iraq. Everyone knows there are foreign hands that want to ensure continuous bloodshed in Iraq. They are the ones who are playing with its security in addition to the invaders who are provoking Iraqis' hatred."

A CAUTIOUS CALL FOR PRESS FREEDOM

¶5. Against the background of official support for free expression offset by setbacks for online criticism reported reftel, a columnist in "Al-Watan" (circulation 42,000) eschewed specifics and emphasized the role of constructive criticism, but even so mildly pushed the envelope, in writing a November 26 commentary on "Press Freedom and the Missing Role":

"Constructive criticism is fundamental to the development of societies in several respects. What we are witnessing today is that there are wide, unused spaces of criticism. The call to activate constructive criticism is a mere diagnosis of the state's backwardness. The media is merely making this diagnosis and is failing to use constructive criticism effectively. Journalists must stop practicing unnecessary self-censorship and defending certain entities. They must freely express themselves and criticize constructively. Officials in various institutions should understand the importance of criticism and not hinder others from doing their jobs. They should understand that criticism is not directed at them personally. They should not consider the institutions they are running as private property that should be saved from any

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criticism."

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